



# The 10 best ways to start your talk

Lessons from the most popular TED Talks

*elo*



"I have an  
important talk  
to give. But how  
on earth do I  
start it?"

**Read on.**

# The 10 best ways to start your talk

Starting a talk is often the most difficult bit, so here are 10 ways that you can kick off your talk with power.

At the end of this booklet I'm going to tell you about our [complete, step-by-step guidebook to speech writing](#), so that if you need help with the whole process, it's right here for you.

Back to the start of your speech. I've studied the top 50 most viewed TED talks (if you don't know what that is, it's an [incredible online platform](#) of engaging talks) and they have 10 incredible and powerful ways to start. Follow me through this booklet to investigate each so that you can decide how best to get started.



*Sarah*

Sarah Lloyd-Hughes, Founder, Ginger Training & Coaching

How the 50 most popular TED talks start:

1	Simply introduce yourself or your topic
2	Start with a story
3	Ask a Question
4	Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em
5	Set up a problem
6	Make them laugh
7	Interact with the audience
8	Use a metaphor
9	Give a punchy fact
10	Do something unique

## Simply introduce yourself or your topic

## Talk opening ①

It sounds too obvious to be good quality speaking, but 12 of the top 50 TED speakers start in the very simplest of places – introducing themselves or their work.

**Hans Rosling:** *About 10 years ago, I took on the task to teach global development to Swedish undergraduate students. That was after having spent about 20 years together with African institutions studying hunger in Africa, so I was sort of expected to know a little about the world.*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- This style of opening is great because it's simple, clear and easy for you to remember.
- But resist the urge to say something really clichéd like, 'Hello everyone, my names Jonathan X and my company's called Magic Bunnies Ltd. It's a real honour to be here'. You want to be interesting from the first word as that's the moment you'll have the audience's attention.
- TED talkers find a way to introduce their work, but at the same time add something else. You're not just *telling* the audience who you are, you're starting to *show* it. As you'll see, the more visual you can be, the more engaging your talk is.
- Build your credibility, without boasting:

**Tony Robbins:** *Thank you. I have to tell you I'm both challenged and excited. My excitement is: I get a chance to give something back. My challenge is: the shortest seminar I usually do is 50 hours. (Laughter)*

Doesn't that a little more likeable better than, "Hi, my name's Tony Robbins and I'm a world-renowned motivational speaker. I've worked with Oprah"? The boasting bit should always be done by the person introducing you, so you don't have to do it yourself.

- Bring a bit of self-effacing humour:

**Dan Pink:** *I need to make a confession at the outset here. A little over 20 years ago, I did something that I regret, something that I'm not particularly proud of. Something that, in many ways, I wish no one would ever know, but here I feel kind of obliged to reveal. In the late 1980s, in a moment of youthful indiscretion, I went to law school. (Laughter)*

### Introducing yourself – places to start your speech:

- "It all started when..."
- "The first time I realized I was fascinated by <my subject> was..."
- Talk about an exciting achievement that illustrates your expertise.
- Tell us your qualifications to speak, but add a bit of humour.

Of course, a simple introduction isn't enough to win over your audience, but it's at least somewhere to start whilst you cool your nerves. To truly impress, you'll need a great journey through the whole talk – as I said, I'll tell you about how to learn more from our complete guidebook to speech writing at the [end of this booklet](#).



## Start with a story

## Talk opening 2

Stories are a popular way to create a quick human connection with your audience. If you have a message that's personal, or if you're trying to influence your audience, a story is a great (and fashionable) place to start.

**Susan Cain:** *When I was nine years old, I went off to summer camp for the first time. And my mother packed me a suitcase full of books, which to me seemed like a perfectly natural thing to do. Because in my family, reading was the primary group activity. And this might sound antisocial to you, but for us it was really just a different way of being social. You have the animal warmth of your family sitting right next to you, but you are also free to go roaming around the adventureland inside your own mind. And I had this idea that camp was going to be just like this, but better.*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- Stories work because they illustrate your message, rather than tell it factually.
- Sweep us up with the telling of your story. Give us characters, drama and colour:

**Ric Elias:** *Imagine a big explosion as you climb through 3,000 ft. Imagine a plane full of smoke. Imagine an engine going clack, clack, clack. It sounds scary. Well, I had a unique seat that day. I was sitting in 1D.*

- Don't worry about being clever, you can find a story in anything, even if it seems really obvious or mundane to you:

**Meg Jay:** *When I was in my 20s, I saw my very first psychotherapy client. I was a Ph.D. student in clinical psychology at Berkeley. She was a 26-year-old woman named Alex. Now Alex walked into her first session wearing jeans and a big slouchy top, and she dropped onto the couch in my office and kicked off her flats and told me she was there to talk about guy problems. Now when I heard this, I was so relieved. My classmate got an arsonist for her first client.*

- Tell a story about something different, memorable or quirky:

**James Veitch:** *A few years ago, I got one of those spam emails. And it managed to get through my spam filter. I'm not quite sure how, but it turned up in my inbox, and it was from a guy called Solomon Odonkoh. (Laughter) I know.*

### How to find your story? A few places to look are:

- A situation or happening that explains how you came to feel passionate about your topic.
- An example of how something went wrong that relates to the solution you're going to give.
- Go back in time to 'where it all began'
- A famous story or example that illustrates your message.
- Films, books or other traditional stories.
- A cliffhanger where the story could go one way or the other. You can resolve it later in your talk.

If you're not used to using stories in your talks, you and your audience are majorly missing out. Challenge yourself to have a go in your next talk. Start thinking about how stories can weave themselves through your *whole* talk.



## Ask a Question

## Talk opening 3

A simple way to begin your talk, a question immediately focuses in on your topic and gets the audience thinking. That's probably why 8 of the Top 50 TED talks use this style of opening.

Questions are a bit like the beginning of an essay or thesis – and as such lend themselves to more logical or academic talks

*Simon Sinek: How do you explain when things don't go as we assume? Or better, how do you explain when others are able to achieve things that seem to defy all of the assumptions? For example: Why is Apple so innovative?*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- Really get us thinking. Don't ask the question that's too obvious, or that's been asked 100 times before. Find a question that will make people suck in their breath and think 'ooh, I never thought of asking that.'

*Apollo Robbins: Do you think it's possible to control someone's attention? Even more than that, what about predicting human behavior?*

- Pick a question that will guide us through your whole talk. Look for the question that best sparks our interest in what answers you're about to give us.

*Julian Treasure: The human voice: It's the instrument we all play. It's the most powerful sound in the world, probably. It's the only one that can start a war or say "I love you." And yet many people have the experience that when they speak, people don't listen to them. And why is that? How can we speak powerfully to make change in the world?*

- If you have multiple questions, make sure they point us along the same journey. It's ok to have a talk that has depth and complexity, but we have to make sure that people are following us, otherwise our precious ideas are lost. Whilst a number of our Top TED Talkers ask more than one question in their opening lines, they're still part of the same investigation.

*Esther Perel- So, why does good sex so often fade, even for couples who continue to love each other as much as ever? And why does good intimacy not guarantee good sex, contrary to popular belief? Or, the next question would be, can we want what we already have? That's the million-dollar question, right? And why is the forbidden so erotic? What is it about transgression that makes desire so potent? And why does sex make babies, and babies spell erotic disaster in couples?*

### Ways to start with a good question:

- "Why is it that...?" (This is the most common Top TED question)
- "How can we...?"
- "What is it about xyz that makes it so [special, fascinating, successful]..."
- "What's the future of xyz...?"
- "What's wrong with xyz... and why should you care?"

A great question sets up your talk and gives it direction. This makes the process of writing the rest of the talk much easier for you.





## Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em

## Talk opening 4

When you learn a little about public speaking, this is usually the classic advice on how to start a talk. Begin by explaining what you're going to talk about. This brings clarity and purpose to your talk.

But it can be a very boring way to begin. 7 of our 50 top TED talks begin in this way, but they manage to tell us what they're going to talk about in a way that's interesting and original...

*Amy Cuddy: So I want to start by offering you a free no-tech life hack, and all it requires of you is this: that you change your posture for two minutes.*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- Make sure that what you're offering is what *they* want to hear, rather than what you want to say. Think about what your audience most want to know about your subject and promise to tell them something *really* interesting in your talk that they haven't heard before.

*Mary Roach: Alright. I'm going to show you a couple of images from a very diverting paper in The Journal of Ultrasound in Medicine. I'm going to go way out on a limb and say that it is the most diverting paper ever published in The Journal of Ultrasound in Medicine. The title is "Observations of In-Utero Masturbation."*

- Be really clear. If you can be short and simple, be short and simple.

*Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story."*

- I'll also give you an example of one of the Top 50 TED talks, where I wouldn't recommend copying the opening. Barry Schwartz starts with this:

*I'm going to talk to you about some stuff that's in this book of mine that I hope will resonate with other things you've already heard, and I'll try to make some connections myself, in case you missed them.*

He gets away with it is that he's a well known figure and the rest of his talk is interesting. The same might work for you if you're a senior person in your field and you'd like to come down-to-earth to resonate with your audience. But I think you can do better ☺

### Ways to tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em:

- "Today I'm going to investigate..."
- "In this talk I'm going to contrast *abc* with *xyz*"
- "I'd like to take you on a journey to discover..."
- There are three key things I want to show you..."

If in doubt, this is a low risk and clear way to begin a talk. 'Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em' is traditionally seen as the intro to a talk, followed by 'Tell 'em' (main content) and then 'Tell 'em what you told 'em'. This is a really basic and boring speech format, so at the end of this booklet I'm going to show you a better way to design your whole speech.



## Set up a problem

## Talk opening 5

One of the most skilful talk beginnings, this method is used by 6 of our 50 Top TED talks. Similar to asking a question, setting up a problem at the start of your talk immediately creates a reason for listening and a direction for your talk. But it also adds a way of resonating with a difficulty or pain facing your audience. As such it can be one of the most powerful ways to begin.

*Andy Puddicombe: We live in an incredibly busy world. The pace of life is often frantic, our minds are always busy, and we're always doing something.*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

→ Set the context for your talk. Tell us what we already know and experience and why that's a problem.

*Sheryl Sandberg: So for any of us in this room today, let's start out by admitting we're lucky. We don't live in the world our mothers lived in, our grandmothers lived in, where career choices for women were so limited. And if you're in this room today, most of us grew up in a world where we have basic civil rights, and amazingly, we still live in a world where some women don't have them. But all that aside, we still have a problem, and it's a real problem. And the problem is this: Women are not making it to the top of any profession anywhere in the world.*

→ Be light, or even cheeky. Humour is a great way to draw your audience in, as we'll see a little later.

*Pamela Meyer: Okay, now I don't want to alarm anybody in this room, but it's just come to my attention that the person to your right is a liar. (Laughter)*

→ You might already have a problem you're solving with your talk. If so, that's great, you'll have no problem using this method. If you don't, then try to figure out: what is it that you're trying to change or solve through your talk? What's the biggest problem that people face around your subject? For example, it could be something they find difficult, or a lack of knowledge.



### Ways to set up a problem:

- "The problem is..."
- "The current situation is this... and what's wrong with it is that..."
- "If you compare how we're doing to how things work in <xyz country, company etc>, you can see that there's a big gap."
- "Why is it that when xyz happens we always respond to it like this....?"

Set up a clear problem that interests your audience and you're already half way there to creating a talk that people want to listen to.





## Make them laugh

## Talk opening 6

The old cliché of public speaking is to *start with a joke*, yet there is a brilliance in making the audience laugh before you do anything else. It opens them up to listening and learning from you. It signals that your talk may be fun and means that the audience will pay attention. Lots of our TED talk openings use humour

**Ken Robinson** - *Good morning. How are you? It's been great, hasn't it? I've been blown away by the whole thing. In fact, I'm leaving. (Laughter)*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- Find your own funny. There's nothing worse than an awkward joke that falls flat at the beginning, so don't risk delivering something you don't feel comfortable with, just to get a laugh. It won't work and it could ruin your whole talk.
- If you can, link your humour to your talk topic. Benjamin Zander does this by creating a comparison to classical music, showing us that there's also a huge opportunity within his field:

**Benjamin Zander:** *Probably a lot of you know the story of the two salesmen who went down to Africa in the 1900s. They were sent down to find if there was any opportunity for selling shoes, and they wrote telegrams back to Manchester. And one of them wrote, "Situation hopeless. Stop. They don't wear shoes." And the other one wrote, "Glorious opportunity. They don't have any shoes yet." (Laughter)*

- I deliberately wrote 'make them laugh' rather than 'tell a joke' because there are many different ways to bring humour to a talk. Matthieu Ricard does it by making a witty observation, which gets a laugh, even if it's not *roll on the floor* funny.

**Matthieu Ricard:** *So, I guess it is a result of globalization that you can find Coca-Cola tins on top of Everest and a Buddhist monk in Monterey. (Laughter)*



### Places to find your funny

- A story of something amusing that happened to you.
- Self-effacing reference to your background.
- Poking fun at the way we generally behave.
- A funny quote.
- A witty or quirky observation.

Humour is really effective if you do it in a way that feels natural.

But of course once you've started off on a high, you'll want to keep the audience engaged throughout, ideally by having notes of humour throughout your talk. Watch out for our guidebook on how to write the rest of your talk, which is coming up at the end of the booklet.



## Interact with the audience

## Talk opening 7

2 of our top 50 begin with asking for a response from the audience. This is one of my favourite ways of starting a speech as it helps you make an immediate connection with the audience. This has a double purpose; the audience are more engaged and you can relax.

*Kelly McGonigal - I have a confession to make. But first, I want you to make a little confession to me. In the past year, I want you to just raise your hand if you've experienced relatively little stress. Anyone? How about a moderate amount of stress? Who has experienced a lot of stress? Yeah. Me too.*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- Get your audience on your side. Keep your interaction positive and use it to get a 'Yes' from your audience. That could be them literally saying 'yes' to a question you ask, or it could be them agreeing that what you're talking about is important.
- Be bold. If you're going to get people to interact with you, they need to see you mean it;  
Maysoon Zayid – working the crowd: Hello, TEDWomen, what's up. (Cheering) Not good enough. Hello, TEDWomen, what is up? (Loud cheering)
- Make sure that your instructions are clear. Do you want people to say yes or no? Then put your hand to your ear. Do you want hands up? Signal that by putting your own hand up.
- Test out your interaction before you do it with your full audience. The results that come may surprise you.



### Ways to interact with your audience

- "Hands up if you..."
- Take a volunteer from the audience.
- Quiz them and see who gets the right answer.
- Rhetorical, e.g. "I want you to remember your first day at school. Think of it now."
- Get them to do something physically. E.g. speak to the person next to you, stand up and do an activity, write something down, etc.



Be careful to interact in a way that genuinely involves the audience, rather than just doing it as a technique. For example, if you ask the audience's opinion on something, you should be ready to use that information to tailor the rest of your talk to who they are and what they need. Otherwise, they'll just be frustrated.

## Use a metaphor

## Talk opening 8

Metaphors are a great device to use to bring a complex idea to life, so why not start your talk with a metaphor? 1 of our top 50 uses a metaphor at the beginning, but it's a tool that many top speakers use. Metaphors are more memorable and engaging than straightforward concepts.

*David Christian: First, a video. Yes, it is a scrambled egg. But as you look at it, I hope you'll begin to feel just slightly uneasy. Because you may notice that what's actually happening is that the egg is unscrambling itself. And you'll now see the yolk and the white have separated. And now they're going to be poured back into the egg. And we all know in our heart of hearts that this is not the way the universe works. A scrambled egg is mush -- tasty mush -- but it's mush. An egg is a beautiful, sophisticated thing that can create even more sophisticated things, such as chickens. And we know in our heart of hearts that the universe does not travel from mush to complexity. In fact, this gut instinct is reflected in one of the most fundamental laws of physics, the second law of thermodynamics, or the law of entropy.*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- Like David Christian, if you're talking about a complex or technical subject, a metaphor might be the best way to appeal to a non-specialist audience.
- The point of metaphors is that they compare a complex subject to something we can all relate to, so pick a metaphor that's an every day object.
- Don't over-egg your metaphor. It should be clean and simple, rather than too difficult to understand.
- Metaphors can be a good source of humour, as you combine something serious with an unusual image or idea.
- Think about using a prop or visual aid to show your metaphor, like David Christian did with his egg video.



### Places to find metaphors

- Food and drink; e.g. our new technology is like a potato with a rocket engine; safe, reliable, but with a surprising kick!
- Animals; e.g. I call it the Meercat approach; first you pop your head up, see what's going on around you, then you scurry back to your group and get busy digging.
- Technology; e.g. He's not just good, he's the F1 racing car of lawyers.
- Archetypes; e.g. Martin Luther King Jnr was the Prince of all activists.



Although just one of our Top 50 TED talks uses metaphor in the opening, many of them use metaphor during the talk. So see if you can think of a metaphor to explain your most difficult concept.

## Give a punchy fact

## Talk opening 9

A fact can quickly and powerfully demonstrate a problem in a way that feels credible. Just 1 of our top 50 uses a fact, but it's certainly an effective tool for getting straight to the point and making every word count. Putting your fact right at the beginning of a talk makes it stick in the audience's mind.

*Jamie Oliver: Sadly, in the next 18 minutes when I do our chat, four Americans that are alive will be dead through the food that they eat.*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- A well placed fact brings credibility to a talk.
- Resist the urge to over-use facts. Jamie Oliver's talk is a brilliant example of using data and statistics in various ways that feels memorable rather than dry. One well chosen fact is much better than a list of data.
- Make the fact as relevant to the audience as possible. Jamie Oliver could have given general global statistics about diet related diseases as his opening line (he does this later), but this way skilfully made the fact relevant to the people in the audience (largely American) and put it in the context of a time frame we could all understand.
- It may serve you to emphasise your fact in some way, e.g. by repeating it, by showing it as a visual aid, or by leaving enough silence for the audience to absorb it.
- Keep it simple. If you have to look at your notes to remember your fact, it's probably too complicated.



### Places to find your facts

- You don't need me to tell you that the internet is a brilliant source of any time of information you could wish for. Be careful that you check your facts and find a legitimate source for them, in case someone asks.
- You might do your own research, survey or study. Whilst this is time consuming and won't be right for every talk, it creates unique data that you own. That's great if you want to become a thought leader in your industry.

If you're used to giving more story or emotion led content, a nice hard fact can be an excellent way to balance out your argument and make it seem more credible.

## Do something unique

## Talk opening 10

Finally, 3 of our 50 TED talkers do something totally unique, or difficult to categorize at the beginning of their talks. This just shows that whatever the 'rules' of public speaking seem to be, you're free to do something totally different to get the attention of your audience.

*Amanda Palmer: being a statue- (Breathes in) (Breathes out) So, I didn't always make my living from music. For about the five years after graduating from an upstanding liberal arts university, this was my day job. (Laughter)*

### How to do it like a TED Talker:

- If you really want to make a splash, take a deep breath and do something different. Some of my speakers at Ginger have started their talks with a bit of role play, a noise or instrument... or even complete silence.
- Be bold! Don't be afraid to shock your audience or shake them out of their current state of being.
- Be sure to connect your innovative beginning to something in your talk. As you'll see when you come to write your full talk, the more powerfully you propel your audience on a journey, the more engaged they will be throughout.



### How to find your 'something unique'

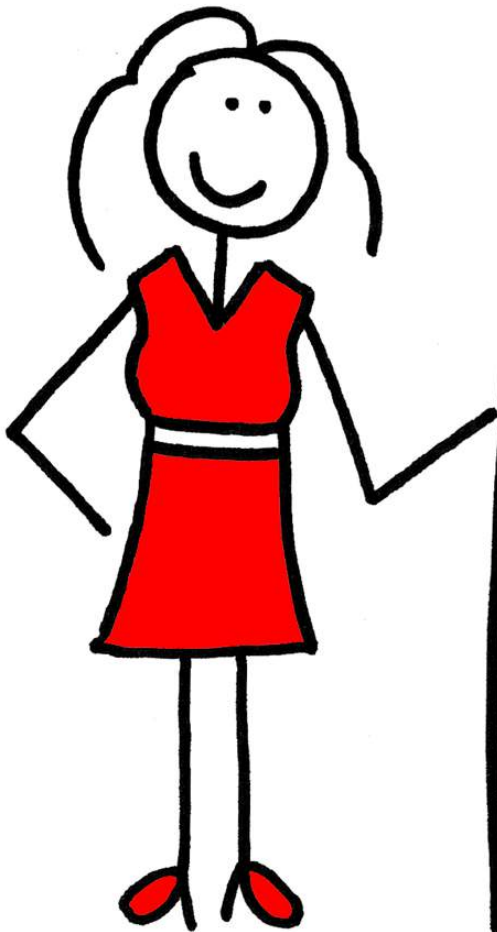
- This is a difficult one for me to advise on because it's very personal to you.
- I can only encourage you to use your personality and interests for inspiration. I've seen a former stripper come on 'in character', a refugee activist begin with a very different accent, a poet start with a poem (Sarah Kay, one of our Top 50) and a singing enthusiast start with a song. I even heard of a CEO beginning his company wide financial update by abseiling from the ceiling to the 'Mission: Impossible' theme tune! The sky's the limit!



Doing something unique works well if you have a bit of confidence and experience as a speaker, but it's certainly not the safe option. For it to pay off, you have to own it, otherwise it may flop.

## Top 7 Tips for Starting a Speech

Once you've picked the style of opening you want for your talk, you'll want to be careful to follow these 7 pieces of advice:



- 1 Words, and attention, are precious. Don't waffle.
- 2 If you can't get our attention at the start, you won't ever manage it. Be bold.
- 3 Be humble by introducing yourself with humour. Show, rather than tell about your successes.
- 4 Paint a picture for the audience by telling stories.
- 5 If in doubt, be clear and concise.
- 6 Set up a problem that you're going to solve.
- 7 Pick a beginning that you feel comfortable with, to help you settle into the flow of your talk.





**Read on.**

## From Opening Lines.... To Writing Your Whole Talk

Now that you have some brilliant ideas about how to start your talk, you'll be wanting help with writing the whole thing.

The problem is that most of us don't have any training on writing a speech or talk; so how are we supposed to know what to do?

How do you know which bit goes where?

How can you judge what's interesting to the audience? And what's just waffle?

How can you edit your talk to make it fit the time you have available?

And how can you make sure that the finished product is actually *good*?

We've developed the **TED Talk Guidebook** to answer those questions and more. It's your faithful companion to writing a speech, whether it's a short talk or keynote. And more than that, to write a talk that's as good as a TED talk. You can use this to wow your audience, **whether your doing a presentation, a pitch or a longer talk.**

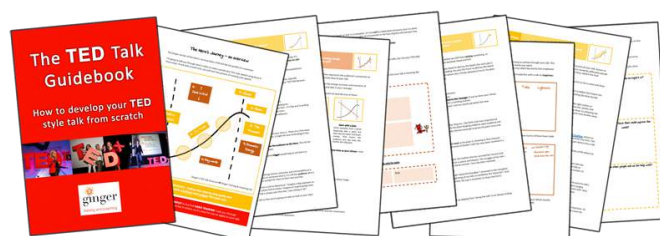
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- Methods for **engaging the audience** throughout.
- Advice on how to **thread a story** as you write your talk.
- **Practical exercises** to guide you through the writing process.
- A workbook that actually creates your talk as we go.



"The TED Talk Guidebook is incredible. It's an invaluable tool for me to write a top class speech and it makes the process fast and easy." – Lucy Barker, entrepreneur

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